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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNICEF EMERGENCY INTERVENTIONS

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SUMMARY

The present report responds to Executive Board decision 1996/2 (E/ICEF/1996/12 (Part I)), adopted at the first regular session in January 1996, which requested the secretariat to present a conceptual framework, including guiding principles and methodologies, for UNICEF emergency interventions to the 1996 annual session of the Executive Board. Further operational papers will be presented to subsequent Board sessions.

Conceptual framework. The rights and well-being of the child are best assured within a stable and nurturing family environment. Armed conflicts, or emergencies that arise as a consequence of natural disaster, increase exponentially the rapidity of negative social change and disrupt or destroy the political, economic and social structures that underpin community cohesion and the capacity of families to protect and care for their children.

Family disruption and separation of children from their families make such children particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Displacement may occur, placing extraordinary pressures on family coping capacities. The death, illness or disablement of children, their traumatization, and the impairment of their cognitive and social development may result. The vulnerability of children to these outcomes can be reduced by actions which strengthen the protective role of families and communities.

UNICEF action. UNICEF seeks to facilitate and support interventions that aim not only at child survival, but also at a range of protections and developmental outcomes. The family, especially the mother, must be empowered - through direct interventions as well as through community and supportive social structures - with the knowledge, skills and resources to care for and protect the child. At all levels of society, basic principles which place value on children - on their right to life, to protection and to the resources necessary for their full recovery and continued development - are promoted and reinforced.

UNICEF emergency programme actions, therefore, are a mixture of advocacy, capacity-building and support to service provision, directed towards mothers, families, communities and the national social and economic environment. While the primary role of UNICEF is to assist government authorities in meeting their obligations to children, it also may collaborate with and through non-governmental organizations working at community and family levels for child care and protection.

The well-being of the child

1. The well-being and rights of the child to survival, protection and development are best assured within a stable and cohesive family which has the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to care for and nurture the child's physical, cognitive, social, psychological and emotional development.

2. The best interests of the child have to be maintained in all circumstances, but especially in times of crisis precipitated by either armed conflict or natural disaster, when the well-being of the child is most acutely threatened.

Threats to child well-being: emergencies and armed conflict

3. An emergency crisis, especially when characterized by social violence and armed conflict, accelerates the stress placed on the vulnerable child and family. When the fabric of society and governance is disrupted or completely shattered, positive social norms and values are eroded, social networks break down, and access to essential social services and economic resources is lost. The family is often left to cope for itself, frequently unable to provide adequate care or protection for the child.

4. Displacement is particularly threatening to the child's well-being. Internally displaced families are especially vulnerable. Most frequently headed by women, such families lack the resources to assure basic economic self-sufficiency as well as access to the services and protection afforded by traditional community structures.

5. Most stressful for the child is family disruption: the breakdown of family and kinship structures; the loss of the mother or other close relatives; and worst of all, separation from the family. Separation from both family and community protective systems increases the child's risk of exposure to violence, physical abuse and exploitation. Girls are at especially high risk of sexual abuse, and boys are at risk of enforced participation in violence and armed conflict.

6. In such circumstances, the child is exposed to a range of outcomes, including death. Surviving children face malnutrition, illness, physical and psycho-social trauma, and impaired cognitive and emotional development. These are particularly acute when essential care and protection, which could mitigate their impact, are absent and when children have been witness to, or participants in, acts of extreme violence.

7. Therefore, interventions to promote child survival are required, but they cannot be addressed in isolation. The rights and well-being of the surviving child must also be addressed through attention to its psycho-social, developmental and protection needs.

Principles of emergency action for UNICEF

8. The guiding concepts, principles and strategies which underpin UNICEF responses in complex emergencies are outlined in the report on "UNICEF emergency services: mission and strategies" (E/ICEF/1996/4), submitted to the Executive Board at its first regular session in January 1996. Of particular note is the UNICEF commitment to:

(a) Assessing and appropriately addressing factors that affect child vulnerability before, during and after emergencies;

(b) Strengthening indigenous capacities at family, community and national levels;

(c) Ensuring a developmental orientation in its humanitarian action;

(d) Working in partnership, recognizing that the needs of children cannot be met by any one actor alone;

(e) Promoting humanitarian principles and codes of conduct.

Implications for UNICEF action

9. UNICEF cooperation combines advocacy, capacity-building and service delivery. It supports actions which prevent or mitigate the negative impact of emergencies - of armed conflict in particular - on the child and family and which stimulate their rehabilitation and recovery. In general, support reaches women and children through national and local delivery systems and institutions. Where these are weak or non-existent, UNICEF works directly through international non-governmental implementing partners.

The national and social fabric

10. Sovereignty, or de facto control by non-State parties, brings with it both normative and legal responsibilities to children and other victims of conflict. The primary role of UNICEF is to facilitate Governments and other authorities in fulfilling their obligations to children. It advocates compliance with the principles contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other humanitarian instruments. UNICEF develops and disseminates information and education materials promoting child rights in collaboration with partner organizations.

11. UNICEF, in collaboration with other partners, helps national authorities to develop policies, standards and guidelines for programmes supporting women and children in need of special protection and care.

12. Support is extended to Governments - and, exceptionally, to other de facto authorities in conflict areas - to maintain and rehabilitate essential social services for children and women in emergencies, particularly primary health care, basic education and community water supply. UNICEF assures material, technical and financial support to national social services, but also, where urgently necessary, will directly support local or international non-governmental organizations to deliver services to populations at risk.

The community and family

13. Community and kinship structures provide families with economic support, social cohesion and protection. Such structures can be of special importance to women, many of whom are heads of household.

14. UNICEF supports civil society networks and non-governmental partners experienced in community action to promote group organization and community participation. It supports community-level action to foster the participation of women in relief and recovery programmes and gives priority to promoting access for women to essential life skills, knowledge and economic resources, all critical determinants of the well-being of the family.

15. Assistance also is extended for the re-establishment of basic services, whether by the Government or international or local organizations.

Women and children in need of special care and protection

16. While in all emergencies every child is vulnerable, those who are separated from the protective family environment require special care and protection. Among them are child soldiers, children separated from their families, children traumatized by violence, or children tortured and raped.

17. At the national level, UNICEF collaborates to develop policies and strategic guidelines. It further assists national and international partners to implement community-level programmes directed to meet the needs of these children, to reunite them with their families and to assure appropriate counselling and care.

18. Internal displacement results in particularly acute vulnerabilities for women and children. UNICEF will support national authorities to coordinate and provide basic services for this vulnerable population. Where circumstances require, UNICEF will assume a more direct operational coordinating role.